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Viewing cable 06BEIRUT2826, LEBANON: MODERATE SHI'A MP YASSINE JABER ON

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
06BEIRUT2826	2006-08-31 15:15	2011-08-30 01:44	SECRET	Embassy Beirut

Appears in these articles:

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VZCZCXRO0473
PP RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK
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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 002826

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/29/2016

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: MODERATE SHI'A MP YASSINE JABER ON
BLOCKADE, HIZBALLAH

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason: 1.4 (d).

Summary

¶1. (S) The Lebanese economy, government and armed forces have been weakened by years of crisis and the recent armed conflict, according to moderate Shi'a MP Yassine Jaber. Lebanon's institutions are incapable of heading off the Hizballah threat without significant support from the international community and especially the USG. Jaber, who may represent a significant strain of Lebanese political thought, minimized the role of arms smuggling and suggested that the GOL might not succeed in grappling earnestly with the problem, even as a condition for lifting the blockade on Lebanon's ports and airport. End Summary.

Lebanon Suffering

¶2. (S) The Ambassador, Pol/Econ Chief and FSN political adviser hosted Yassine Jaber, a prominent but moderate Shi'a Member of Parliament and two-time former Minister for lunch. Jaber, a frequent Embassy contact, is AN MP on Nabib Berri's Amal list, although not an Amal member himself. Jaber opened by claiming that, "the blockade is worse than the war." The economy has suffered and he hinted at capital flight. International companies, he claimed, have had to endure 35 days without communication with the outside world and would not remain in Lebanon under such conditions. The Ambassador noted that many U.S. companies had decided that Hizballah's increased popularity and triumphalism after the conflict made Lebanon an undesirable place to be based.

¶2. (S) Many of Lebanon's wealthiest families have also delayed their return to Lebanon or departed for good, Jaber noted. The "big spenders" were staying away from Lebanon because, among other things, private schools had recently decided to follow the lead of public schools and officially delay the beginning of the academic year. (Note: The American Community School, on whose board Jaber serves, decided this week to delay its opening to October 9, a week earlier than the new target opening for public schools. End Note.) Jaber cited the disruption to education as one of the hardest blows to Lebanon from the recent conflict.

¶3. (S) The conflict made Hizballah popular, Jaber claimed, but it destroyed a lot of lives and livelihoods -- in particular, due to the targeting of infrastructure. If arms smuggling is not controlled, the Ambassador noted, the next conflict will be worse; Hizballah is willing to destroy Lebanon to ensure its own survival.

Conspiracies

¶4. (S) Jaber complained that there is a perception in Lebanon that Israel operated with a green light from the international community in the recent conflict. While the Ambassador clarified that there was no secret Israeli "September-October War Plan" as alleged this week by Hizballah SYG Nasrallah, Jaber noted that the latest rumor had it that Israel launched its attack out of an "Agenda of Envy" to target the Lebanese economy because of its recent success, especially in the tourism and other service sectors.

When challenged by Pol/Econ Chief who noted that Lebanon's tourism infrastructure was left largely untouched, Jaber noted that the oil spill had made Lebanon's beaches unattractive and sparked rumors that its seafood was contaminated and might cause cancer, even from breathing the fumes. Peddling the usual conspiracy theories, Jaber also alluded to local reports that the Israeli forces had used ordnance containing depleted uranium.

Arms Smuggling and the Blockade

¶15. (S) Jaber repeatedly asked why the blockade could not be lifted at least to allow flights from European airports to Beirut International Airport as a "Phase One" in reopening Lebanon's access to the outside world. Ambassador and Pol/Econ Chief pointed out that "Phase One" had been the opening of flights to Amman, and the Ambassador noted that

BEIRUT 00002826 002 OF 004

should the international community grant a "Phase Two" without any assurances from Lebanon on the arms smuggling issue, there would in all likelihood be no real progress. While grateful for "Phase One," Jaber noted that the current situation was difficult for both Siniora and the Jordanians, the latter being accused of collaborating with Israel or Israeli intelligence.

¶16. (S) Jaber noted that Israeli PM Olmert had stated in a press conference with UN SYG Annan that lifting the blockade depends on direct negotiations between Israel and Lebanon -- which would be untenable. The Ambassador repeated the USG position -- that we hope for a total lifting of the blockade but that Lebanon has to demonstrate a clear will and effort to abide by its commitments and UNSCR 1701 obligations to stop arms smuggling.

¶17. (C) Jaber challenged the Ambassador's assertion that smuggling was a real problem, in particular at the airport. The Ambassador maintained that airport procedures had, in fact, allowed smuggling of all sorts. This implied that arms smuggling and other security issues are far from resolved there.

¶18. (C) Jaber repeatedly raised the possibility of technical solutions to the arms smuggling issue. He noted that Lebanon had tried using customs verification services such as that offered by the Swiss company Societe Generale de Surveillance in the past but that "the time wasn't right." He hoped for deployment of equipment, technicians and trainers from Germany at border points. Pol/Econ Chief noted that the German assistance, according to the Chief of the Customs Brigade with whom he had spoken earlier that day, would be deployed at only four crossings on the land border with Syria and would do very little to stop clandestine smuggling. Also, even if the equipment was world-class, the Lebanese still needed to show that they would use it as intended. The more important issue is that Lebanon demonstrate the political will to stop smuggling, and provide support to officials who may face intimidation or corruption in attempting to stop it.

¶19. (C) Jaber asserted that Hizballah wants to "absorb the anger and let things calm down" for the time being, and that its supporters -- in particular, the Shi'a -- have no appetite for another war, or a "round two" in Nasrallah's phrase. The Ambassador reminded Jaber that "Hizballah is provoking the next war right now" through its arms smuggling activities.

Siniora Government in Trouble

¶10. (C) Jaber said "we need an injection of support" and that Siniora needs some political gesture or victory to help him survive after the Stockholm Conference. He bemoaned the government's performance during and after the crisis, citing in particular the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' inability to take energetic diplomatic action abroad. It is inexcusable that the GOL lacks Ambassadorial representation in Washington and in New York. Furthermore, he suggested that the GOL should have rented out hotels to house people made homeless during the conflict, which would have helped the destitute while propping up the hospitality sector.

¶11. (C) While Jaber admitted that Siniora and Speaker Berri had scored well with their Seven Point Plan, both figures have lost ground due to the perception that Hizballah has been more active against Israel and on Lebanon's behalf. Jaber maintained that Berri had asked Hizballah not to rebuild houses in Amal areas, so that Berri could (with some uncertain resources) do the job and keep his supporters' allegiance.

Lebanese Armed Forces

¶12. (C) The Lebanese Armed Forces, which Jaber and the Ambassador agreed performed admirably and gained confidence and integrity during the 2005 Cedar Revolution, also are in dire need of support before they can take up the additional responsibilities that will come with their deployment around the country. Jaber asked, "Why can't we have a bridge of

BEIRUT 00002826 003 OF 004

immediate assistance?" He suggested an emergency program to equip the army and checkpoints. He bemoaned the delays in getting UNIFIL deployments to the south, and noted that the German assistance to the customs and other border authorities could take two months or more.

¶13. (C) The Ambassador suggested that Lebanon should ask for UNIFIL help on the Syrian border. The LAF Chief had not specified needs to the international community; he had merely announced that the Syrian border was "watertight," which was neither serious nor credible. Jaber countered that UNIFIL's deployment was already taking too long and that the LAF could not wait to coordinate its deployment with UNIFIL, and at any rate such an idea was "controversial." In addition, Hizballah is currently trying to project an image of cooperation rather than confrontation, weakening the case for the GOL to call in UNIFIL.

Lebanese Parliament to Snub Visitors?

¶14. (C) Jaber informed us that the Parliament had taken a decision today to refuse to receive any official delegations -- including the CODEL planned for this weekend -- or to travel, in protest against the blockade. The Ambassador characterized the decision as unwise, in particular in view of the Lebanese-American character of upcoming visits, and appealed to Jaber to fight to reverse it. He noted that many of our cooperative programs, including humanitarian assistance and disposal of unexploded ordinance, could be jeopardized as a result. It seemed foolish for the Parliament to miss the opportunity to make Lebanon's case to congressional visitors.

¶15. (C) Pol/Econ Chief asked whether yesterday's visiting Iranian delegation -- including the Iranian Vice President -- had been entertained by MPs. Jaber confirmed that MP's had met the Iranians, explaining that, "that was yesterday." Pol/Econ Chief told Jaber that was a distinction that may be lost on some, as well as a bad signal to send to the international community. The Ambassador noted that several figures in the U.S. political scene are questioning their support for Lebanon and again stressed to Jaber the importance that the Parliament remain open to visiting delegations. (Note: For the upcoming Codel, MPs will come to a lunch hosted by the Ambassador. End note.)

Shebaa Farms -- Obsession or Pretext?

¶16. (C) While more pragmatic than many of our interlocutors on the subject of the Shebaa Farms, Jaber stressed several times the importance of the territorial issue as a pretext for Hizballah to retain its weapons and gather supporters. He had no answer, however, when the Ambassador challenged him

on next steps after a proposed return of the Shebaa (and satisfaction of other public Lebanese demands such as the freeing of Samir Kantar and an end to airspace violations by the IAF). The Ambassador said that people might be more willing to think creatively about Shebaa if Lebanon had a clear, credible blueprint for dealing with Hizballah's arms and Iranian influence after a resolution.

¶17. (C) Jaber stressed also that Hizballah's armed force was of a quality both different and more dangerous than any unofficial force previously seen in Lebanon. "These are not normal Arab fighters -- they stayed under bombardment and did not flee. They have an ideology" that empowers them to prodigious acts of resistance, Jaber said. The Shebaa Farms issue provides them with political cover, but Israeli incursions -- Jaber used the analogy of a rape -- convinces Lebanese to join and support the group. Even Al-Qaeda leader Aiman Zawahiri, who has waged a genocidal terrorist campaign against Shi'a, and other fellow Sunni extremists lent their support to Hizballah.

¶18. (C) In response to the Shebaa-as-pretext argument, the Ambassador noted that the UN had certified the 2000 Israeli pullout from southern Lebanon. Jaber claimed that "one of the biggest mistakes" was the U.S. decision at the July 2000 donors' conference to stipulate that the LAF would have to deploy to the south as a condition of international aid to that region. Arab donors, Jaber said, also neglected the

BEIRUT 00002826 004 OF 004

south. These factors had made the south fertile for extremism. Disputing that no assistance had flowed to the south since 2000, the Ambassador repeated that Lebanon had offered no credible plan to reward the return of the Shebaa and the freeing of Lebanese prisoners with a serious disarmament of Hizballah.

FELTMAN